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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Current Intelligence
26 August 1963

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Review of Recent Developments in South
Vietnam

Summary and Conclusion

Ngo Dinh Nhu is the key to the situation in Saigon and appears to be the controlling figure, possibly without President Diem's assent. Nhu acted through a few generals, some of whom were probably unaware of the full implications of the move, to bring about martial law. He then used his own police and special forces to crack down on the Buddhists. The fact that the situation is so obscure may reflect some diffusion of power among Nhu, Diem and the military at the moment. Nhu's indications of concern over the Buddhist crisis are probably genuine. He is believed to be unacceptable to many of the military, and some of them are concerned with ways to eliminate him. The armed forces are not unified and if a military coup is attempted, there is a danger that serious clashes may break out among competing elements.

Background Summary of Events

1. The reports dealing with events leading to the action of 20-21 August and with the power structure in South Vietnam have been contradictory. It appears, however, that the action involved only a few generals, that the raids were largely the work of police and special forces, and that the military structure is not monolithic. Most sources claim that Diem is the only leader who can maintain unity and that he was not responsible for the repressive measures. We can not be sure, however, that these sources are sincere.

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2. The following outline seems consistent in all reports:

a. A group of generals, probably no more than seven with the commander of the army, General Don, as spokesman, approached President Diem on 20 August and recommended that he give them authority to handle the problem of Buddhist agitation. What they apparently had in mind was to arrest Buddhist leaders, hopefully without bloodshed. Nhu was not present at this meeting. Diem agreed to a declaration of martial law without consulting his cabinet. When the ministers were informed later that day or during the night, they were not fully in accord with Diem's decision. The state of emergency went into effect as of midnight 20 August. Within the next two hours, raids were mounted against four pagodas in Saigon, and by dawn against pagodas in Hué and other large towns. Presidential Secretary Thuan informed the US embassy shortly after the raids started that martial law was in effect, but offered no other details.

b. The raids in Saigon and apparently those in Hué were carried out principally by combat police and special forces. The participation of the army in other towns is possible, but not established. Arrests throughout the country were reported to total about 1,500, but the US consul estimates close to this number in Hué alone. Casualties occurred on both sides; the government's claim that no Buddhists were killed is doubtful. Key Buddhist leaders including elderly supreme priest Thich Tinh Khiet, Thich Thien Hoa and Thich Thien Minh are in government hands. Thich Tri Quang, a firebrand priest from Hué--and possibly others--escaped detention. The government suspects that Quang is one of two monks taking refuge in the USOM building, but this is not the case.

c. The martial law decree made General Don acting armed forces commander. The military governor of Saigon is III Corps commander, General Ton That Dinh; and in Hué, First Division Commander, General Do Cao Tri. The other corps commanders are responsible for martial law in their corps. Three generals previously on the shelf--Nguyen Ngoc Le, Pham Xuan Chieu and Le Van Kim--

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have been named deputies to General Don for various functions. Province chiefs--previously responsible both to the military and Interior Ministry--are now under the corps commanders. Despite Don's position as top military commander, each of the three key officers in Saigon--Generals Don, Dinh, and Special Forces chief Col. Le Quang Tung--takes orders directly from the palace. The special forces have operated under the presidency.

d. Public opinion--particularly among students--in Saigon, Hue and other cities now seems hostile to the army as well as the government. Some resentment against the US has also been reported. An official statement even cites disaffection among Nhu's Republican Youth. Abroad, reaction has been almost unanimously critical. Communist propaganda claims that the US is directing the events.

Analysis

3. The action taken on 20-21 August followed in many details reports concerning remarks made by Nhu at a meeting with the entire general staff on 11 July. [REDACTED] Nhu at that time asked the generals for support in a "coup," urged a clamp down on the Buddhists and other opposition elements, and promised jobs to those generals who were on the shelf. Nhu later stated publicly that the Buddhists might bring on an anti-Buddhist, anti-American coup; on 12 July the government announced promotions and citations to many key officers--including Generals Dinh and Tri and Col. Tung, along with some notoriously unreliable officers. Buddhist leaders themselves were charging as long ago as early August that the government planned raids on the pagodas which would be comparable to St. Bartholomew's massacre. The commander of the II Corps, General Khanh, whose initial comments on the 11 July meeting belied any coup prodding by Nhu, later stated that Nhu had compromised the generals and that they had no choice but to support him. He implied at that time, however, that Nhu might merely provide a vehicle to an unspecified objective.

4. Since 21 August, Nhu has been issuing statements in his role of leader of the Republican

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Youth, Madame Nhu has been very vocal but Diem has made no public statement since the proclamation of martial law. It should also be noted that broadcasts on the army radio (now returned to civilian sponsorship) echo the phraseology and philosophy identified with Nhu and have referred to him as "beloved." These factors would suggest that Nhu has assumed greater prominence, if not influence.

5. Some civilian and military officials, including Nhu himself and General Don, assert that Diem is in full control. Don has said that Diem makes the decisions while Nhu is his executive agent. Other sources, however, state that Nhu is in control, that he masterminded the action against the Buddhists, and that the raids by police and special forces occurred without the knowledge of army officers who were ostensibly in command. They claim that Nhu in effect tricked and divided the army.

6. Nhu's role in the events of the past few days or weeks seems undeniable despite his own statement that he was unaware of the generals' plan to impose martial law until after they had met Diem on 20 August. General Don states that the plan was first presented to Diem some days earlier, and [redacted] Nhu met with a selected group of generals (reportedly Don and his chief of staff Khiem, Dinh and Oai, the psychological warfare chief) and with Colonels Tung and Y, who heads the national police.

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7. Diem's knowledge of or role in these events has not been clarified. He may or may not have been aware of Nhu's plotting. In conversations with a US observer, Nhu has implied that he would put "country above family" and has criticized Diem for showing weakness and vacillation on the Buddhist issue. He has also at times referred to Diem's rule as transitional. At the same time, there is strong evidence that Diem agreed with the attitude of the Nhus that the answer to the Buddhist problem was to clam down on Buddhist leaders, and that his promises of conciliation, made under US pressure, were either grudging or deceitful. While Buddhist demands tended to magnify in response to concessions by the government, these concessions were belated,

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in some cases partial, and undercut by Madame Nhu's statements. The government provided the Buddhists excuses, if they needed them, to question the government's good faith.

8. A volume of reporting suggests that Nhu acted on his own, but it is possible that Diem agreed to let Nhu serve as the instrument of a policy both preferred in order to keep Diem dissociated from the repressions. The timing of the action seemed calculated to take advantage of the absence of an American ambassador. Many reports of Nhu's 11 July meeting state that Nhu told the generals the shift in US ambassadors would bring a shift in the tone of US policy. If Diem was witting in the entire affair, however, it does not fully explain the laudatory public references since given to Nhu and his pet projects.

9. [] including Nhu claim that a group of generals acted on their own to end a dangerous situation. Most [] are close to Nhu or were themselves involved in the action. The military had been distressed over the Buddhist issue from the beginning and had become increasingly alarmed over its effect on their troops, the public and the war effort. Contrary to Nhu's allegations, however, available comments from the military in the early stages were largely critical of the government's handling of the issue as unnecessarily harsh and provocative. General Don, who said on 8 July that there was a military plot, claimed action was necessary because the government's failure to make amends to the Buddhists had let the situation get out of hand. In recent weeks, only one report has been received of an officer, General Dinh, stating he had lost sympathy with the Buddhists. Some officers may well have concluded that, right or wrong, the Buddhists were sufficiently out of hand to warrant firm measures, but almost all now seem appalled by the steps actually taken.

10. Nhu's indication of concern over the military [] may be warranted. He has taken a risk with apparent support from some, but without any assurance of the reactions of others. The ultimate loyalties of many key officers are still unclear, but reports are beginning to be received that some of them are discussing ways to move against Nhu.

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